

White Lightnin' and Hot Georgia Nights

Excerpt from "Neighborhood of Secrets"

By Carter Robertson

I loved working with Jessi Colter. Her Mama was a strong Pentecostal woman like mine and we had an unspoken understanding. She had tender memories that would pick her up and carry her through hard times and had not seen the abusive side I had lived through. She held a unique place in history as the female Outlaw with Waylon, Willie and Tompall and she could yank a crowd to their feet in a heartbeat with one of her smiles. I was watching, learning and soaking in the privilege of being in her band.

One early summer night in 1976, a spur of the moment invitation was extended and my life forever changed. We were in Georgia at an outdoor, backwoods kind of venue. By now, Waylon had already asked Barny to play keys with him and he was pretty much settled in. The venue was sold out and the air was so thick and muggy you could actually see it. We'd been spittin' bugs all through Jessi's show and it seemed like every time I opened my mouth to sing I was batting another one away to dance in the spotlight around my face. I really didn't mind it that much though; there was something raw and earthy about the whole experience. We weren't trying to please any out-of-touch critics or easily swayed radio reps because Waylon's "give-a-shitter" had broken, so what was left was just down and gritty music. The crowd was a mix of drug crazed southern rock and rollers that had jumped on board and were part of the growing momentum. Sprinkled in were a few older country music fans that enjoyed their own Saturday night vices and were never late for Sunday morning service the next day. There was an irony to it all that was definitely not lost on me.

That night some ol' boys right out of the hills, aiming to be hospitable, had brought a jug of their very special white lightnin' to pass among the few, the brave and the stupid, of which I had already earned a lifetime membership. Having been doused once in a previous band, I had learned to be selective with these kinds of offers. Where I used to avoid looking people in the eye, I now made it a point to make eye contact and decided there was something about these boys that felt like family; maybe it was the overalls? I had finished Jessi's set and figured my work was done for the night, so I put the jug to my mouth and took a healthy swig. Burned like hell all the way down but had a rather nice glow once it landed.

While I was basking in this little homemade buzz, the band left the makeshift dressing room and headed for the stage. For weeks my routine had been to stand out of sight over by the crew and watch the show. I'd challenge myself to find a part in my head and then silently sing along, the whole time picturing being out there soaking in the music and rhythm taking place on that exclusive piece of property we called the stage. Night after night my friends played their stories unaware that they were making history and memories for the folks who forked over their hard earned dollars to be part of something that made them forget, or better yet, remember. Finding a niche wasn't easy because the guys in the band had all the harmonies covered and the worst thing a chick singer can do is step on somebody's part! As I

was standing off to the side waiting for Waylon to go on and feeling content with my ability to blend in, he walked up behind me, leaned in and said, “How ‘bout you come out and sing with me tonight?”

I wondered briefly if that white lightnin’ had hallucinatory properties in it. I looked at him and told him I’d love to and asked, “Which song?”

“All of em,” he replied.

Then he smiled that smile with his cigarette kind of clinched between his teeth and hollered over his shoulder to the roadie, “Get her a mic!”

Holy shit! What did I just do? Now it’s important for you to know that this wasn’t a decision he had included the band in, or even told them what he was thinking before he walked on. We all worked very well together on Jessi’s show but the next hour and a half was a *man’s* world.

“This is no dress rehearsal.

We are professionals and

This is the big time.”

Yes, you can buy the t-shirt!

So, I’m following him out there, feeling the stares of these boys all asking themselves the same question, “What’s Carter doin’ out here?”

Barny kept looking at me from behind the piano nodding his head, his body language telling me I could do it. Don’t think about it Carter, just DO IT!

Taking my cue and confidence from my best friend, I stepped up to the mic and once again did what I had done a few months before in the studio; I sang. All those weeks of standing off stage in the shadows studying, soundlessly singing in my head, paid off. I was selective about which songs I felt I could add a little something to and didn’t choose to sing on all of them. That approach worked and by the end of the show I was a “Waylor!”

Looking back, that was a turning point. This big giant of a personality believed enough in me to throw me out there without a net for the second time, and somehow innately knew I would not simply survive, but I would thrive.